The Conditions of Man

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The Conditions of Man

by chaparral_crown

Summary

“There are only two truths around here. Any man can be king for a night,” the younger man says with a wry grin and long drawl, sliding cards from the card shoe into tidy rows in front of himself and Hannibal. “But by the morning, the house always wins.”

An investigation into the deaths of casino hostesses in Las Vegas is made more interesting by a strange card dealer with an uncanny skill at reading guests at his table. Hannibal investigates the depth of his skill, and the card player surprises him with how truly acute it is.

Story by chaparral-crown. Artwork by wwwww.

Notes

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Part 1

Hannibal is not accustomed to bodies in quantities larger than three these days.

This is not from a lack of motivation, but merely practicality - there has not been much need for it since his early education and apprenticeship in France, before he later committed to surgical schooling in Florence. It had been interesting in his youth, pulling trays out, beholding the unseemly ends of the rest of humanity. Having witnessed plenty of unseemly ends even at the tender age of 16 when he first dons and doffs his latex gloves and rubber apron, they do not disturb him. They are commonplace. Death is rife amongst the sheep.

There's a simple elegance in the cabinetry of a mortician's room, everything carefully put away like a spice rack. Hannibal thinks it again now, where four such doors are swung wide and trays drawn out. On them, unlike Hannibal who is now many years older since the apprenticeship, youth lies timeless. Four women of no great similarity in coloring or height or body type.

They are all very lovely - but bruised and tired, is the first thing Hannibal thinks when he looks at the steel tables of the Clark County morgue. The crime scene pictures in little laminate sleeves to the right of each show streaked but painted eyes, care with their faces before someone crudely reshapes them. Contusions and bruises in abundance all over. Played with too hard, ill dressed, put away improperly. None are older than 34 years of age.

How nice of the mortician to wash their faces, to make them clean once again. Only one, the youngest at 19, has been requested to be returned to her parents for burial. Two are Jane Does, and the third estranged from family. "Put her in a pine box and do what you want," an aunt is recorded as saying on the phone, when asked for considerations for the woman's burial. "She knew better."

(*Nobody knows better, when push comes to shove. You do a lot of shoving these days, to those who push.*)

"A room of battered muses," says Hannibal, and Alana nods while he continues to stare a moment longer at the pale faces in the blue-light of the morgue. "Though we are yet shy five of them for a full set."

Alana, also blue and pale but not a mark to be seen on her, looks like she could belong. “Unfortunately, only four to go,” she says with a sigh. “Five is who we’re here to see.”

Five is a variation on a theme that Hannibal sees in the morgue. He absently taps out a line of Rachmaninoff against the linen of his pants, the latex on his hands catching the fibers.

It is searingly hot on the asphalt of McCarran International Airport, where the macromolecules of one Corinne Kwon are actively in decay, sitting lax on a brown metal folding chair. She is fresh enough to not be swollen, where a Claddagh ring is sealed to the inner joints of an index finger but still flexible. (*Her mother will later confirm it’s hers and shake her head - a disappointment from a promising child. You appreciate her lack of hysterics in interviews, even as you find her wounding silence curious.*) She is seared enough by the summer sun to smell of charnel. Despite her ribs and intestines spilling from the front of her silvered-iridescent white dress and the scent, she looks quite precious and petite.

A man, and that is undoubtedly the psychology of their perpetrator, for all that it is embarrassingly obvious and a misfortune to be associated with, is dressing prostitutes in their finest (*read as: cheap, sweatshop made*) club outfits, and setting them up to hold court in the parking lots of Las Vegas, Nevada. Pretty things with tired skin from too much alcohol and not enough water and sleep, delicate little spindly fingers of young ladies who hold a cigarette more readily than an ink pen.

Corinne has almond-shaped eyes and a round face, the fractious teenager of a veteran and his expatriated wife who becomes a fractious woman following a drop-out from the local university. Drugs, boys, lack of motivation-talent-intellect after years of assumed excellence - nobody is quite sure how to pin her switch from academic and athletic promising girl to one of the oldest professions in the world, a cocktail waitress by night, and a hostess of another kind in the darker parts of it.

(*And honestly, you think, not so terrible of a profession if it wasn’t insistently shoved into dark alleys and recruiting from the desperate and naive. A global mismanagement, that. There’s so many other things to be ashamed of, and you haven’t found a one that sticks to you.*)

Hannibal, looking ponderously into the blown-white cornea of Corinne, thinks it is both a waste, and exceedingly pedestrian. The person, the unseen perpetrator, the display.

When her body is discovered by an unfortunate TSA security guard that sees her at the gates of a plane hangar, he stares for some minutes before he stutteringly calls 911. Everyone can't quite look away from the gleaming sharpness of the xiphoid process of her sternum, the caged red-white wetness of the costochondral joints keeping her ribcage intact. She is messier than the other four. An escalation, then. Jack Crawford, veteran of a thousand such scenes, also watches from ten steps away, the flashing of his eyes almost startling against the squinting dark of his face. He tells people to leave, to show some respect, speaking into a voice recorder and taking his own notes while his forensic team gathers samples and polaroids of the remains.

(*Not a person, just what's left. Leftovers, you would laugh, but you don't think this particular girl deserves the ridicule.*)

Alana Bloom looks nervous and sad from Crawford's side, speaking in doleful tones. She's a strange parallel of their enthroned corpse-woman-child, wearing a blush-pink blouse tucked into black trousers. She has left her white and black-ribbon trimmed blazer in the trunk of a rental car in Terminal 1's short term parking that was too warm to wear. She's unhappy with the violence against the victim. She's unhappy to feel underdressed. She's unhappy that the two coincide as though equal, and battles shame over it.

Hannibal is crouched now in front of Corinne, looking at the interlocked seam of her dress where the perpetrator wasn't able to tear it any further to expose her abdomen, sweating unrepentantly in a three piece suit of light blue, and is only unhappy that there's so little of interest here for him, other than the fact that this is the fifth time this has happened this year, and that Crawford needs the extra help to make certain this isn't cartel, or a higher level talent of destruction.

(*Grisly, cruel, repeating, says him. Laughable, says you.*)

People stare anyway, despite Jack Crawford's walking about wielding the victim's shame like a cudgel - it's hard to look away from other people's disasters. Hannibal has built a portfolio of his own on the surety of that. He hopes Jack Crawford wields a similar irritation and offense for those works too. Corinne can be an object of someone's attention a little bit longer this way, though it certainly doesn't help anymore than everything else she tried before now. The silhouette of the Las Vegas Strip against the heat of the tarmac is a jigsaw of fantastical towers beyond, as good a resting place as any.

The parents are not helpful.

“No one’s surprised by this,” says Sunny Kwon, an aging father and chronically grey in the fluorescent lights of the county coroner’s office. Next to him, his wife Nari Kwon has steadfastly clasped her hands on the top of the table. She doesn’t speak, mostly nods. Angry, Hannibal suspects.

“I’m sorry Mr. Kwon, but do you mean not surprised by her getting into trouble, or the circumstances of her death?” Alana asks gently. “Is there someone that would have done this to her that you know of?”

(*Disembowelment on an airport tarmac would be quite the thing to have foreknowledge of, but you see the spark of grief in the heavy lids of dark brown eyes, the most severe of disappointments in a difficult life, and know with the surety you incise people’s traumas that this isn’t one Sunny Kwon would have thought to expect.*)

Mr. Kwon shakes his head, pinched with his own frustration to be here in the interview room, with two psychologists, FBI officials, and the local detectives for the case looking at him and his wife with a critical eye. Much ado about nothing, thinks Hannibal, even as he suppresses his own irritation that Alana wasn’t allowed to conduct this quietly away from curious eyes.

“Corinne’s been wild for years now,” he sighs. “She doesn’t come home, she doesn’t call. We told her this could happen,” he adds. “The real miracle is that it’s taken as long as it has.”

Incidentally, Hannibal agrees. Risk is rewarded, but also punished. Their girl has caught the eyes of someone either rewarding himself, or punishing her - it doesn’t really amount to much for the Kwons. The final answer to the equation yields the same numbers. The room, however, is insistent on hidden purpose, darker schemes, more of a thesis and less of the scribble on the warehouse wall that this murder is. Everyone’s falling into entropy around them, and Sunny and Nari Kwon have had the time to resolve themselves to this end for their self-destructive wild child.

(*You wonder if your parents wouldn’t feel the same, 40 years in the future, watching if your own dangerous behaviors ever come to light. You were always going to become* ***something*** *- they would have been just as dull and weathered by the inevitability of it, in the way that the same flavor of disappointment still overcomes wealth and privilege. “My son who picks minor lies apart for the*

certainty there's a bigger lie somewhere? My son who loves his horse, but readily pulls back rabbit skin to see the muscle twitch beneath?" says Simonetta, with her shock of white hair in her bangs, kohl-lined eyes, neat pin curls. "Yes, of course this was coming.")

"Maybe it's him," suggests Agent Brian Zeller, disturbed when they head to their cars. "Abuse at home manifests in destructive behavior. Seemed kind of dismissive of the entire thing, like we didn't just bag and tag his only child like she was dressed for prom."

"They're in shock," Alana interjects.

Agent Beverly Katz shakes her head. "Doesn't account for the four others that got dropped before Corinne Kwon either. He alibi'd out for all of them - got him on camera working night shifts as a guard for a gated community."

"They all tread the same path, these unfortunate women," says Hannibal, straightening the front of his blazer. "I do not think we'll find much in their histories, other than the typical stories of descent into sex work. Their professions and convenience make them the target, not the circumstances that led them to it."

Alana sighs. "And they sure have a distinct path."

From across the room, Agent Jimmy Price shrugs. He has resolutely remained in a collared shirt with a jaunty bowtie from tarmac to hot rental car to police station, putting on and doffing nitrile gloves casually between evidence swabs like he isn't sweating himself into a miserable slouching mess.

Hannibal admires it - style over comfort. He likes the idea of Jimmy Price taking samples of hair from his own creations with the same resolute sense of dress code, smiles with his eyes at the idea of it being traces of Jimmy's own Scottish Fold cat he had waxed poetic for on the flight over, the only member of the team who opted to fly business class to Las Vegas with Hannibal in the row next to him. (*An easter egg in tall grass, just for Mr. Price.*)

"Unsub is either a local or a frequent flyer," says Jimmy, rubbing at a chafed neck from where the sweat and the strap of his camera have irritated the skin. "But a first time offender. There's been skin scrapings from under the nails and some fluids that link it to the same guy, but they're not in the system here. It all comes out in the wash eventually when we find likely suspects, but it does make this kind of a needle in a haystack moment."

Indeed, thinks Hannibal.

Poor family lives and disappointments, crass displays, uninspired men meddling with the soft lamb's meat of young women. All easily rinsed away, all easily explained, but nevertheless a time commitment for them. But he's accepted the responsibility of the week's investigation, and Hannibal has never let a life experience slip by without torturing it into meaning something, even in barren soils.

Paradise, the area around the Strip is called, unincorporated from the city proper despite all the meticulous advertising and mystique of the name Las Vegas. He's never dug into it before, a European at heart with time in Monaco and Mallorca to fill this particular niche for gambling and extravagance. Now that he's heard the name, he finds it gauche, but comedically appropriate.

The commonality between the girls that show up in their finest and foulest in the Vegas summer sun is not just that they are prostitutes, but that they are hostesses, and that all of them are known to work the casinos and the clubs. This doesn't come as a surprise to anyone, though that the FBI has been called speaks to the poor quality of the human trafficking and sex crimes investigations in the local area. But then again, nobody works for the same place, nobody works the same shift. It's entirely possible that being a hostess is secondary to being willing to take money in exchange for their company.

Logic that follows is simple - the investigative team should stay in the casinos and work the floor and staff for observations. The death of a few night-walking women hardly ends the calls for others like them, and here is where they may be found. Agent Crawford, quite pleased with himself before their travel and just after Hannibal has agreed to consult, offers Hannibal middling-quality lodgings on the west side of Las Vegas Boulevard, surely a splurge for an out-of-state investigation on a stretched government dime.

(*Alas, Jack has never quite learned how to play the game in DC, and uses vinegar rather than honey to communicate with adjacent agencies, supervisors, directors - there will always be a set budget for him, while his colleagues ride unchecked on American taxpayer funds. No loss for you, who's own accumulated wealth likely accrues more in yearly interest unaltered than Jack's department does with active grant requests and deliberate attempts to spend rare surpluses.*)

Hannibal smiles, and declines promptly, waving a hand at the gruff token protest from Jack.

He leans into the visitor's chair, hands neatly crossed at the knee. "It's my first time, Jack, and likely my last. I'll take care of my sleeping arrangements."

Hannibal considers for a moment, widening his smile further and shrugging mildly. "If you feel strongly about it, just add a lodging line to my consulting costs - it's nice to have something to gamble with."

The fun of the Las Vegas Strip is that it doesn't take itself too seriously. As a person inclined to the same philosophy as long as it's in good faith, this suits Hannibal just fine.

When he initially looks for a hotel the night before leaving, he is half convinced he will stay in Caesars Palace for the perversity of how entirely inaccurate it is. His next consideration goes to The Venetian for the spectacle of chlorinated, shallow canals with mid-western vacationers being paraded through them by entertainment industry employees that do, indeed, need a day job. There's a whole array of other ludicrous themed accommodations to entice, all with bright entrances, the floral displays, the promise of some kind of manufactured excitement.

"I figured you'd hate this whole thing," Alana had joked with a half-smile, her rolling travel bag at her feet as they queue up for their car at McCarran.

"The theatre of it is delightful," he answered honestly. "I don't go to productions of ' *The King and I'* expecting real elephants and an authentic Thai castle, and so too do I not expect a real Roman villa in the Nevada desert when I am merely here for the spectacle."

"Behold the whore of Babylon?" asks Alana, but she winces at her own words seconds later, striking too close to home.

In the end, Hannibal settles on nostalgia, and how one captures its particular flavor in glittering slot machines and cigarette smoke. He has always enjoyed visits to Lake Como, and the Bellagio's fountains and pretense to the Italian countryside in this arid place is a testament to man's ingenuity

and arrogance. When Alana drops him off at the concierge with an envious laugh and a promise to catch up with him later, he has to congratulate them - he is dazzled by the absurdity of it.

“Welcome Doctor Lecter,” greets a lovely girl in brown velvet blazer, surrounded by tiled murals, rainbow art glass, potted plants and trees. The travertine of the floors is polished smooth, the lobby delicately scented, and a crush of people try to hurry past this all to get to the less attractive core beneath the veneer. It is just bordering on too much.

She smiles with her mouth, and not her eyes, and Hannibal relates with a strange kind of pride in this random woman. He thinks he likes it here. Perhaps people who don’t have misunderstood the prompt.

Dinner is a solo affair tonight - with the travel, the crime scene and forensics, and the interviews, even Jack Crawford is not able to wrangle all of the team for a group huddle and some greasy burgers and fries in his hotel room at Luxor. (*When asked about his choice of lodgings, Jack gives a cheery smile - “It’s close to where I need to be, and money not spent on somewhere to probably not sleep is money spent on a good dinner at the end of this trip.” It affirms your decision to keep to your own choices. You would prefer to sleep well* and *eat well.*) He has been promised by several brochures and a very obliging concierge clerk that food is often what draws those whose excesses don’t extend to the card tables, the women, and the overpriced drinks.

When in Rome, he raises a glass and nods to the ridiculous sign of Caesars, plaster coated chicken-wire chariot and all.

The fountains of the casino thunder just after the entree, dappling the windows of his restaurant for the night with mist and bright lights. Paganini thunders outside from the stereo, chased by Frank Sinatra and it is all very surreal, watching crowds gather at the edges of the lake and the central road of the Strip beyond it. Hannibal eats cheeses, and honeycomb, and candied nuts, and marvels at the imitation of casual *al fresco* from behind the wide bowl of his wine glass.

Still, it is rather lonely with the sparse businessmen and mid-week holiday guests. He looks forward to the weekend, when he can brush off the dust of their sad prostitutes and the unseen aspiring John that would consecrate them after his damage is done, and watch people pretend at having fun in the thick of herds.

(*Truly there is no more deluded a beast than man.*)

But not all fun need be in the company of others, only near them, Hannibal supposes. The card tables don't sleep, work night or not. If anything, the work is beginning only now that night has fallen, and the Bellagio is the foremost on the Strip for good players and high stakes. Hannibal will see if they can test his mettle.

Scouting a table is easy enough - a Wednesday night hardly necessitates all of them to be at the ready, dealers standing as horses at the gate before each green felted expanse. Something light to start, good for conversation and for give and take; blackjack. With the cut of a crisp handful of hundred dollar bills, he opts for the club tables, where it's likely a challenge can be found. He has low expectations for much else. It's not very likely an American casino will provide the kind of wine that fits his standards.

Only $300 minimum to play, he thinks with a smile. Perhaps the company in Vegas is expensive after all.

There are only two tables open this evening in the club room, one with a sly looking woman with bright, red ringlets of hair - at her table, three gentlemen in their suits and a fourth put-upon looking woman laugh and clink glasses. Well to do salesmen perhaps. A housewife called in to decorate their party. The dealer moves cards easily, never talking loud, always toothy in her grins. A fox, that one, focusing on feel-good moments instead of actual conversation. He imagines she'll have a good take at the end of the night, Wednesday or not.

The other table is hosted by a man, leaning easily forward with loose cuffed sleeves where two men play as well - the number of chips between them is greater, black-purple-yellow stacks looking like king's cakes scattered on the green of the felt. While no one is particularly formal in their dress and bearing, even the dealer, there's a seriousness to their faces that suggests an acuity for the game. So the competitive table, not the money burner.

An actual contest of skill is preferable. He sits with the men at the table, and hands over two thousand dollars.

The dealer, a slender but sturdy figure with his rakish brown curls and slightly askew glasses, offers him a skittish glance and stretches against the wood of the table. The black shirt and double

breasted vest of his uniform look misplaced on him, sleeves billowing with a poor fit. “Starting out confident?” he says quietly, but whisks up the bills easily enough, handing over ten black and two purple chips, and makes a tally somewhere behind him.

“Starting out with the cost of a work week in Vegas, sans the salary” Hannibal replies, and creates tidy stacks of five. The two purple chips sit between his fingers, clay heavy and polished. Three black go forward as his wager. “Perhaps I shall have the cost of two work weeks, if all goes well.”

“It typically doesn’t,” the man to his left says, sighing and pushing his own bids forward. “Will doesn’t play nice, though he plays fair.”

“Gotta practice somewhere, Jake,” says the dealer, Will. He has a sly look hiding under an abundance of sparse beard. “Though if you keep coming to cut your teeth on me and Freddie, security’s gonna think we’re too friendly.”

“God forbid anyone here be friendly,” says Hannibal, and is gratified to see both men smile.

“Just keep it professional,” he drawls, mouth a twist of amusement. Hannibal thinks of orange peels in cocktails, and the effervescence of citrus. (*Bitters, too, and the burn of distillate - potentially complex, if approached correctly. So infrequently is, more the shame* .) Will in his theatrical shirt and vest begins to deal, cards put down in orderly, symmetrical piles.

His nametag, a simple silver with the Bellagio’s swooping monogram, also reads ***Will*** . Nothing more complex, with no given last name. He’s from ***New Orleans, Louisiana*** , and Hannibal, to his surprise, picks up absolutely nothing of the Southern articulation he’d expect. He has a flawless Atlantic accent that lingers on syllables intimately, drawing words to him tenderly.

Will neatly cleans out everyone in the first round, as well as a second, and Hannibal taking a third. The aforenamed Jake, to his right, just sighs, and takes his chips off the table. The man at the far end of the table pulls his own chips back as well, and nods.

“That’ll do it for you, boys,” Will teases, and waves them off before turning to Hannibal with a considering glance.

“They’ve been here for a while,” Will shrugs. “I apologize - I’ll need to do a reset and shuffle, but let me have the bar bring something over for your time, and you can surprise me again with another table sweep. They don’t happen to me often, all odds considered.”

“And you are quite skilled with measuring your odds,” Hannibal says with a tilt of his head.

Will waves over a hostess and security guard, a dour looking bearded man with salt-and-pepper hair and a distrustful look. Between them, the chips are counted in full, though Will seems cold to the guard - perhaps some inherent dislike between them. The club room’s hostess, however, he greets like an old friend, and she turns to Hannibal, long brown hair disappearing into the whorls of the little brown velvet vest, and a sleek black skirt making more of a woman of her than she actually is - she offers Hannibal a wine list, attractive parquet serving platter tucked into her white fingers. Hannibal thinks of four tables in the morgue, the fifth waiting, a sixth expected.

(*Even you can see the trap this place sets for those naive of stronger hungers, gobbles up children even as you laugh from a high seat faraway at the theatre of lights and dullards walking up and down the boulevard.*)

“You’ll want the Albarino,” says Will, not even taking a glance at the list, though considering Hannibal, eyes flicking to the young lady and back. He signs off on his chip deposit, and seems relieved when the guard departs.

“Is that so?” says Hannibal, not giving the list more than a sightless idle flip of his own.

Will gives that twisting half-smile to him again, a hooked thing that turns his face from serious to boyish. Hannibal admires the pointedness of his cupid’s bow lip, made elegant instead of severe by his amusement. “She’ll have to actually open the Albarino.”

It actually sounds nice, a fine Spanish white. Clever, clever. Hannibal smiles as well, a scythe of white teeth.

“What makes you think I’d know the difference?” he asks.

The dealer smiles fully, moving between his hand of cards with a single-handed skill that Hannibal watches, cards shuffling between fingers in a dance. Several years of skill, several years of calluses

on the joints of the ring finger, holding his favorites in the deck. He has stormy eyes, something green but grey, the clouded water of a city harbor. He likes to hide things in them, and Hannibal is arrested by a brief flash of iris, pupil, and freckled copper ephelis from beneath the acrylic of glasses.

"I'm here to make money," Will says bluntly. "And the high dollar table is usually quick work. Confident, wealthy guests are the ones least bothered by ending on a loss as long as they felt good for a while." He pauses. "More to the point, the accent. Suggests European, something East Bloc, which suggests casual familiarity with viniculture. Double vent suit, so bespoke probably with the plaid. You didn't ask for a drink because you didn't think you'd like one."

Will slides his fingers under his cards and flips. Queen and a ten for Will, ace and a nine for Hannibal. Draw - dealer wins by default. Hannibal doesn't frown, but he puzzles a bit at the frankness of this.

"Astute," he drawls, adding a chip to his bid, marvelling at his own hand hovering over his remaining cache. "Then how do you see the other two gentlemen?"

Will hums a laugh. "I see them as what you get when Freddie's on shift. Only thing that matters when handling card players is that they keep putting chips down. Tonight I'm just here to bust some of the regulars so she can do what she does best."

"Charm?" Hannibal asks wryly.

"Swindle with a smile," Will says, and cracks his neck. "I can too. Money's cheap when you have a lot of it - I don't have a lot, but you do, so whatever makes you sit here the longest is my best play. Get you a glass of non-shitty wine that you appreciate, say the right things, make you feel special, and lose this hand, but win three or four down the way with more chips on the table, and my boss lets me leave," he says. "Same rules every night."

Hannibal is refreshed by his honesty, even as he chafes at the assumption of his losses. "And what would you say the rules are, Will from New Orleans?"

"There are only two truths around here. Any man can be king for a night, main floor or high limits alike," the younger man says with a wry grin and long drawl, sliding cards from the card shoe into tidy rows in front of himself and Hannibal. Hannibal appreciates the cleanness of it. "But by the morning, the house always wins."

When Hannibal flips his play, it's a clean 21 Blackjack.

"Looks like you're king for the moment," Will winks, and gifts him his pot of $400 in chips total.

Hannibal is charmed, as a snake rising from a basket must feel.

True to his promise, Will takes his chips in increments over an explanation of the origins of Basque and Txakoli wines, as Hannibal drinks sharp sips of the Albarino. (*"Minerality with a touch of herbs," you say with complete sincerity, and Will's smile is amused.*) Will seems to take Hannibal's lecture to heart and asks intelligent questions, but always, step by step, leads Hannibal to spending his full budget for the evening. He's never very obvious about it - it's always an option to leave. No jokes, no jabs at Hannibal's skill or losses, rather more akin to bleeding him in a thousand cuts. Hannibal contemplates properly counting as they play, but at most attempts to start it, Will turns the conversation elsewhere, and sets his card shoe aside to be shuffled like he's read it in Hannibal's face.

It's not much of a loss for him truly, and the man makes for good company. It's how he wanted to spend his night after all.

Hannibal would hoard the younger man's attention all night if it made sense to, but per Will's comment, he's here to make money, and Hannibal is unwilling to deliberately lose. Will holds his cards well against him as an opponent, and no matter the sparkling insight, Hannibal's not in the mood to completely have the wool drawn over his eyes. Let Will take some other Wednesday night unfortunate's cash.

They play a few rounds more while Hannibal talks lightly of the Catambrian mountains and trekking the granite of them as a university student, when an opportunity arises for Hannibal to detach.

Two elderly gentlemen smelling of old cigars and glasses of whiskey take a seat at the table and slap down their purple and pink chips with a casual arrogance that Will receives with a benign smile. They show off their watches, and it is vulgar. They aren't *quite* rude per se, but they are

certainly not the company Hannibal wishes to keep, and Jack Crawford will expect him in the morning.

Ah well, the fleeting nature of liminal spaces and people, and so on. Hannibal shrugs, and gives Will a smile, holding his own this turn and declining the next deal.

“Not big on sharing seats?” asks Will, changing out chips with a gentling smile.

“I shan't distract you,” Hannibal says with a coy look of his own, delicately handling his returned chips between his fingers, favoring the textured clay edge as one favors a knife’s edge for sharpness. “These gentlemen seem prepared to beat themselves against your palisades for a time.”

“He’ll need more than just his full attention to beat me,” says one of the other men, smug, very drunk. “Tore up the tables on the floor, figured I may as well double my money in here,” he adds. Hannibal sincerely doubts it. His compatriot, snorting, appears to as well. Will is still and serene and unfailingly deferring to them.

(*That’s what he does, reading what they want, as sure as he reads what you wanted like you had drawn a picture of a challenging conversation and a good glass of something sharp and acidic. These men want superiority, obedience, and while Will can provide, you yourself will offer none* .)

Hannibal watches from a distance in a lounge chair as Will robs them of their earnings on the main floor. It seems fitting. When they give in, another person takes their place, a flashy woman with bleached hair and high heels, and the smile of someone deep in their cups.

He overhears the woman introduce herself as Christine from Orange County looks at him like he’s the most darling man she’s met. She has a flashy wedding ring, cheek implants, and an almost pathetic need for his attention. Lonely, business trip with her husband perhaps. Neglected.

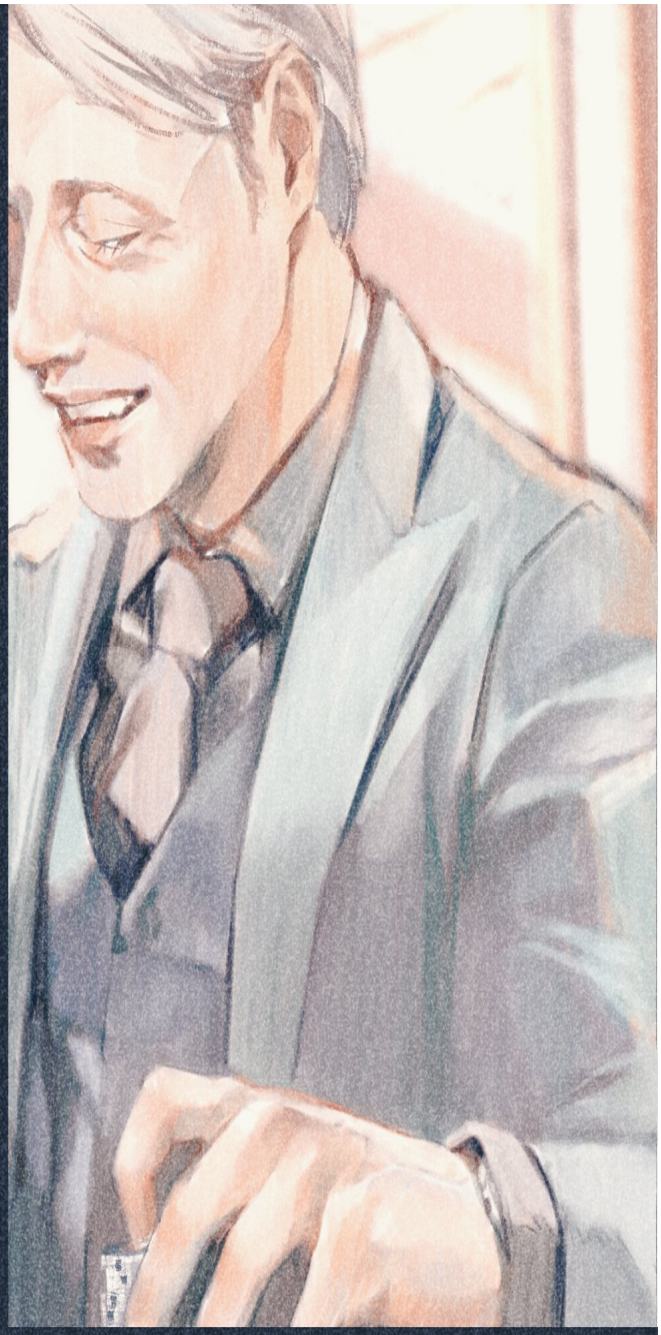
Will, professional but kind, calls her Christy, and never lets a loss end without a “Sorry sweetheart, you need a better bandit’s mask to rob the bank. Let’s try again?” He has a kind face, where for Hannibal as a player he was all blank spaces and the calculating amusement of a Cheshire cat, sliding between spaces, but patient.

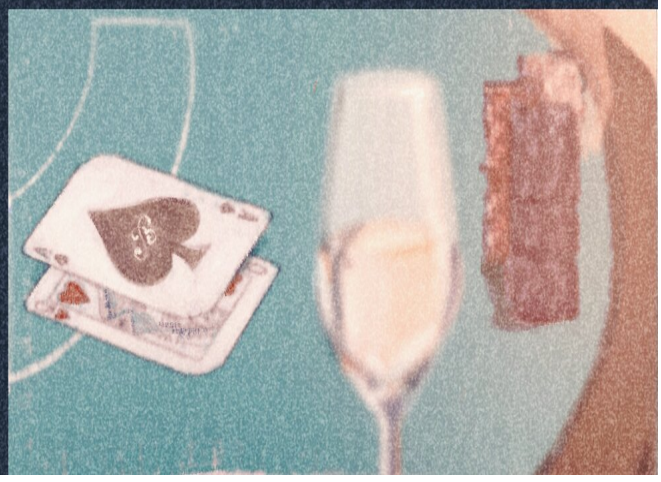
And she plays and plays, like he’s her lover, or her dearest son. He asks her about her trip, where she lives, what she likes to do. She drinks Dr. Pepper and whiskey from little highball glasses brought by waitresses, and tips with red chips without a thought. Will takes the rest of her chips by

the time Hannibal picks himself up from his seat in the lounge, no longer able to justify the late hour.

Will calls her a cab, double checks that she has her purse, and she leaves with a grateful smile. He switches his shift with another dealer, and disappears into the quiet casino floor.

It is 2:37 am when Hannibal returns to his hotel room, thankfully alone and able to remove the stench of cigars and air fresheners and travel from himself. The fountains are off for the night in the rondelle below the windows, and the lights chase each other in the quiet of a weeknight. Hannibal wonders at what people will sit with Will from New Orleans tomorrow, and if he will read them half as well or better still than Christine from Orange County, or Hannibal himself from an East Bloc country with his double vent suits.





Part 2

“Saw you at a blackjack table last night,” says Beverly Katz, balancing an artificially pink drink in her hand with her wallet. “The club room, no less. In a hurry to blow some money?”

Her hair is unbrushed, but she smells like passionfruit, vanilla, and the slightest touch of amber in a waft of perfume, sprayed copiantly until she doesn’t smell like a sleepless night in Las Vegas. She doesn’t seem to mind the heavy cascade of cigarette smoke and deodorizers on the casino floor, even at 7:35 am on a Thursday morning. She must not sleep well, or not sleep at all. Perhaps spending a lot of time at the tables.

(*American veteran father you think, Korean mother, child of an interracial marriage made possible by foreign occupation. Only child. An inherited gambling addiction, a need to relate to her father as the daughter of a strange, calculating marriage. You wonder at what brings her to the FBI, if she isn’t better served working with living people. Dead ones can hardly admire her effervescent charm, her easy grip on a billfold while handling a cheap vodka cranberry and a hand of Poker. She looks alive here in a way she doesn’t in the lab. Different variables.)*

She slurps from the straw of her drink.

Hannibal, smiling but benignly tolerant, just gives a polite, quizzical smile.

“Oh come on, Doctor Lecter, it’s Vegas. *You* ,” she says with a pointing finger, which reads as *unlike me* , “didn’t get trapped in the forensics meeting from hell in Jack’s room. I’d be disappointed in you if you didn’t spend it on something other than people watching from the safety of a bar. I didn’t get going until close to 1 in the morning, and Caesars is a long walk from Luxor.”

Hannibal gives her a nod, still smiling. “So right on time,” he says, feeling the back of his teeth with his tongue. “Isn’t that when all the mischief is supposed to start?”

Beverly laughs. “Don’t give the gremlins water after midnight? Yeah, that sounds about right. I wasn’t surprised to see you as much as I was the dealer though. Total pro at getting people too

comfortable with his company. Had a frank conversation about summer camp and fishing in the Potomac, if you can believe that."

Hannibal puzzles for a moment at this. "Will, from New Orleans?"

"Well," Beverly shrugs, "Will from Wolf Trap, Virginia on Tuesday anyway. That guy totally steam-rolled me when I first got into town, but he sure as hell wasn't at the high stakes table," Beverly says with a twisting smile and a tilt of her drink. "Doing five dollar buy-ins at the Craps table down the way at New York New York. Guess he works for MGM, not Bellagio specifically?"

This information surprises Hannibal - for a man set to make money, the downgrade in play cost seems counterproductive.

"A man of the people, wherever those people are from," he says with a gesture to the floor around them, and Beverly Katz gives her own fox-faced nod, amused despite the day of pointless work ahead.

(*And it is pointless - 115,000 employees sucked into the void of the Strip, servicing the masses day and night, and nothing more pointed in their countenance than any grocery store or strip mall employee in the rest of the States. An additional 106,000 added in tourists daily, cycling in and out of their hotel rooms. The perpetrator is as banal as the whole of them. You do not see the value in looking.*)

Thursday morning and afternoon reveals no perpetrator or solid suspects, though a number of people are asked if they would be willing to consent to a saliva swab and fingerprinting to rule them out conclusively. It's startling to Hannibal how many agree, eager to have themselves removed from the conversation entirely, but ignorant of the repercussions. At least two of the 13 or so that are interviewed in the morning come back as having evidence of previous robberies, and have the temerity to look shocked when the Clark County authorities return for them late in the day.

"I thought this was about a murder," says one young man, blonde, still fighting acne alongside the muscles and beard of an adult, as though wearing a disguise. He works the valet at the Mandalay Bay resort. He is painfully naive.

“It is,” says Jack Crawford, firm. “It doesn’t stop you from being guilty of other things.”

“Do you think you’ll be able to figure this out?” asks the front of house manager for The Cosmopolitan. Her eyeliner is too thick, and her false eyelashes crooked, but she carries herself like a queen, and Hannibal gives her a mental twisting smile and bow as she shuffles forms as easily as cards. “I’ve got people calling out on their weekday shifts worried they’re gonna get Friday the thirteenth’d.”

“We’ll do our best,” says Alana, and pauses, like there’s something to add. So concerned about hurt feelings, implying something unattractive about the women filtering in and out. “Tell the girls to go straight home after work,” she frowns, committed. “Not worth the extra cash for anything else.”

She makes it sound simple, like safety from death trumps rent, food, addictions, obsessive wants. When was the last time Alana really worked with the working poor? The hierarchy of needs is unshakeable. Some come to work hating their jobs, some out of a sense of personal preference or skill, but unfailingly to search for money.

He is $3000 poorer than when he started his week to one such person. Hannibal remembers the taste of Albarino, the charade of being royalty for the duration of the game, and thinks it’s a pittance to experience it in a different taste and texture than he knew previously.

Thursday night has no Will in the halls of the Bellagio. When Hannibal looks into the lounge, the young cocktail hostess is there, just as fresh faced and overdressed for her age as before, but she waves at him, eyes very blue and glassy in the gold lights of the lounge. His heart is gladdened by her presence - another night survived, another shift accounted for.

(*Children shouldn’t join the circus. Children shouldn’t join the night haunts of people seeking depravity. If she does, no loss to you, but what a shame.*)

Miss Katz’ supposition may prove true and Will isn’t really bound to one spot. A talented dealer is an asset to pass around where needed. It doesn’t really merit a manhunt to find him - he’s a clever player that has gotten his fair share of Hannibal’s pocket money in very little time. His unusual perceptiveness is likely no more than the shrewdness of any grifter at their game. That he is an

attentive listener and made certain that the drinks served were enjoyable is all that recommends him.

But the series of yeahs, yes sirs, no problems, and you're very welcome Doctor Lecters he's gotten from stiff-faced casino, hotel, and restaurant staff throughout the day, never really knowing anything about the investigation or the dead girls or a shred of original thought leaves him desiring Will from New Orleans' shrewdness.

(*"Oh we wouldn't know anything about that," says the valet management at Mandalay Bay declining to look at the high school headshots of their dead muses, and her bronzer is too thick beneath her cheekbones, making you think about theatre makeup for overly bright lights. Wearing masks. "Our hosts and hostesses are upstanding people. We don't support sex work around here," she adds, and you wonder at the cognitive dissonance of that statement. You wonder if they understand the entire Strip is predicated of things that run parallel to sex work. You wonder if there is such a thing as an upstanding citizen.*)

He adjusts his sleeves, french cuffs pulled by a pair of pearl-top links.

Shrewdness it shall be. Besides, people watching is its own kind of entertainment, and what a shame it would be to see everything only through the scope of a dreary investigation.

The hunt is a drag in a new way, very unlike the calculated sort he performs in his own haunts at home. He does not know his target's favorite watering holes, or his routine, and this makes for frustrating work. Hannibal goes from building to building working his way south towards the end of the Strip, ambling from casino floor to floor. There's plenty of people watching to be done, and he marvels at the beginnings of the usual vacationers starting to trickle in. There's more energy now than yesterday, friends and family instead of business partners wandering aimlessly with novelty drinks and shopping bags.

(*You wonder at this - surely all these shops exist in their own cities and towns? Does the night glow really add that much to big box store retail and flagship household luxuries? How quaint.*)

He's well accustomed to walking on foot from his own times spent abroad, when having a car wasn't a part of life as much as it was a nuisance, but the progression of stylistic choices he encounters start to blur a bit in the neon of the slot machines, or worse, on the sidewalk outside.

The promoters for clubs and establishments of less reputable pleasures try to offer him all manner of scantily clad women on flyers. The sound of them flicking the cards becomes harsher with every repetition from block to block, the hissing of a cicada rising from the dirt to seduce in sweltering July night's heat.

It comes as a profound relief around 10 o'clock to spy his game.

Will has wandered into a different high limits lounge almost three long blocks down from his previous haunt, where everything is velvet, vines, dark walls, and art deco. In the dim yellow lights of this new lounge, Hannibal can appreciate the urban glow it gives the younger man's cheeks and simple white and black attire. Will stands before another Blackjack table, looking very mischievous when he sees Hannibal approach.

"Going to leave me with some more black chips in exchange for a drink?" he taunts with a smile when Hannibal takes a seat. It makes Hannibal happy to see it, wiry thing that it is. "A bit of a walk from Bellagio, but I guess it wouldn't be much fun to be here without the variety. But it's going to be hard to settle the business trip bill if you spend the business trip budget," teases Will.

"Oh, it's all federal," Hannibal replies glibly. "I've got nothing but the American people's money to waste, and where better than in this iteration of...well, I suppose a jungle boudoir?"

"Got it in one," Will deadpans. "I suppose that consultant money is for top-notch analysis." he frowns, and looks at the palm pattern carpet and rosy pink of the table felt. "In all fairness, I don't know if I totally get the theme either," and he slides into a smile when Hannibal proffers a handful of hundred dollar bills with a jaunty roll of a wrist.

(*The wrist that doesn't show your watch - sometimes it's better to not show your full hand, and your right wrist with its shiny Vacheron Constantin is equally as telling.*)

Out come the chips, marching blue, black and red across the table. Out comes a glass of a Napa cabernet after Will whispers something to another hostess, dark skinned and plush lipped, smiling around a nose ring. Their familiarity is less comfortable than the girl at Bellagio, but Will knows her all the same - friendly, probably not close friends. He can relate to that.

Hannibal starts strong with his cards, and Will rewards him thusly - he asks gentle questions of what Hannibal thought of the walk down here. ("Dreadful.") It's comfortable, the way that reading

a book in the evening is comfortable, or sharing a glass of port. Not a challenging game here at the beginning, save for how best to read the other's face.

"Why not Baccarat?" Will asks after a moment's quiet. "Similar concept, fancy crystal company named after it, and more pageantry and energy." Will deals again. "Seems more your speed."

"Less intimate," Hannibal replies crisply. A two of spades and a seven of diamonds sits on the table before him, and he taps for another deal. "I won't pretend that the math doesn't work out better for it statistically, but an element of strategy and conversation is preferable to simply increasing money without thought. That's what bond accounts are for."

"Ooh, aren't we fancy with our responsible retirement plans."

Hannibal smiles, watches a three of diamonds join the others. He considers. "Practical. May I ask though," and he taps for another card. "What is your retirement plan, Will? I can hardly imagine you mean to politely listen to an ephemeral crowd of card players in hopes of tips in casino chips for the remainder of your life."

Will seems to seriously consider it, but also is a little sour faced when he flips the new deal and an eight of clubs stares up. "It's what I'm doing right now, isn't it?" he asks, discarding and taking a loss.

"On this Thursday in July, yes."

Will shuffles the card shoe, ring finger (*empty of rings, you note*) tapping against the screenprint yellow of a play square on the felt. "Retire in Florida, have a boat, be able to go to sleep by 8:30 like most old men. I have a skill, and I do well for myself - the cards don't really mean anything to me, but knowing how to get the best of a stranger is a kind of lifelong career, and this seems like a less destructive use of it." He shrugs.

(*It is, you concede. Your life is built on your own dance around expectations, and how best to subvert them.*)

Hannibal threads his fingers to sit on his knee, leaning backwards in the lounge chair. He considers Will.

“Cards shouldn’t mean much to anyone,” he says, looking the younger man directly in the eye. “Historically, even the illustrations of the suits and trumps are random caprice of engravers, different from city to city. Many try to ascribe value to them but, short of interviewing a progression of dead Europeans from the medieval era, most explanations are unfounded.”

Will smiles, meeting his gaze. “Laboring over a meaningless succession of graven images?”

And isn’t that a lovely summary of it all. Hannibal considers again the strange young man and his clever hands. “The purpose of a card deck changes easily. Typically between types of games, but sometimes also as a method of instruction.”

“Like tarot?” asks Will. “Doesn’t seem instructional as much as delusional.”

“Ah, but you see, they were always designed as a game card, and it is only by the assigned meaning of others that they are not thought of as such in the States. Tarot and variations of it are still quite commonly played as a suit deck in Europe, competitively in Austria.”

Will nods, flipping cards between his fingers and listening, torn between another hit and a safe play of 16. Hannibal admires the creasing of his fingertips, pressed against the rosy felt, wonders what else they can crease against when under stress. (*Perish the thought, you think, and still go looking on.)*

“I have a particular interest in them,” Hannibal adds. “My mother’s family, the Sforzas, were primary patrons to the creation of the original Sforza-Visconti trionfi decks during the Italian medieval age. Their countenances and homes are extensively shown in the trump cards - it’s a rare peek into a very old photo album in some ways.”

At this, Will looks up and leans into the table, interested but smirking. “Well if having progenitors of a classic card deck as family isn’t laying your proverbial dick out on the table, I don’t know what is. I guess I shouldn’t be surprised,” he adds. “I didn’t really expect to get a lecture on the terroir of northern Spain last night either. You some kind of titled son of a son that’s here for giggles?”

Hannibal gives him a nod, tapping on a stack of blue chips, softly scraping at the table top. “A count *and* a son of a son, if you can stomach that. Hannibal, out of a long series of patriarchal Hannibals.”

“Your mother should have saved you from that, and spent less time educating on the tarot cards.”

“I’ve always seen it as an opportunity for a conversation starter,” Hannibal teases in return. “Whatever would I discuss with bright young men while they work at my investment earnings if not ways to insult my pride as well as my wallet?”

“Apparently obscure card decks and the relative meaning of card games.”

Hannibal rewards that with a black chip for Will, not the table. “Well played. But perhaps we can discuss something more obscure, just to make sure I leave a thorough impression.”

Will makes a gesture towards the windowpane of his grey suit with the canary yellow stripes, his floral tie sitting like a bright bird on his chest, and the black chip, and the room as a whole, with a look that says *impression made, you strange European dandy* . Hannibal finds himself entirely tickled by it.

He smiles into a sip of the wine. It tastes of plum and black pepper, bracing on the tongue. “Let’s turn to the subject of cards as learning tools,” he says, beginning a new hand on the table. “I have thought about your statement from last night, about making kings for the night before sending them off on their merry way as beggars, and it brings to mind the Mantegna Tarocchi, a sort of early tarot deck made in the time of the Sforza-Visconti decks. The suits are very fanciful and non traditional, with themes rather than pips and trumps. No cups, swords, of staves either. Not very useful for games, but an interesting piece for instruction,” he explains.

“Should I expect some old-fashioned, moral disciplines?” Will says with a quick grin.

“Perhaps,” Hannibal nods. “There are five suits, unlike a standard deck, but the suits are the Conditions of Man, the Muses and Apollo, the Virtues and genesis of light, the liberal arts of its time, and the firmaments with their creation. The Conditions are the best representation of your house rules.”

“I can see why it would make a bad game,” Will laughs. “The Conditions of Man would definitely be a mouthful for the average middle-aged drunk, nevermind the rest.”

“A little heavy for late night follies, to be sure. Nobody particularly wants Temperance staring away from them looking demure and in Christian grace while they finish the fifth rum and coke of the evening. But for teaching young people concepts and desirable traits of the time? Very useful.”

“I’ll bite,” Will says, “what are the Conditions?”

“A progression of abject poverty to wealth, of both the monetary and spiritual kind. The Beggar, the lowest of the Conditions, ranks first. Your King for a night would be eight rank in a suit of ten.”

Will nods, chips dancing, rewarding another hand. “Quite the fall. Vegas in a nutshell, with everything in between, though I’d guess the reality is most people go back home to their jobs to stave off falling to bottom rank.” He grins. “After all, you can hardly say you had a successful trip without a few regrets to drag back with you.”

“Exactly so,” says Hannibal, “though I wouldn’t know about the regrets - it’s my first time, and I’m having an excellent trip.”

“Then I haven’t taken nearly enough of your money yet,” says Will.

“I really must thank you,” says Hannibal with an elegant shrug of his own - he can’t refute it, still perfectly content with his expenditures thus far. “I don’t often get to discuss the Mantegna set, small footnote in history that it is, but perhaps by your trade, you are best equipped to teach others more about it.”

Will gives him a long glance, and plays a good hand. He seems a little troubled. “Sounds about right,” he says after gathering his win. “Nobody knows more than me about watching as a spectator, people falling from high places in their most attractive outfits and most embarrassing tastes.”

A story there untold - one that Will chooses not to elaborate on, and Hannibal can only watch, puzzling over it.

All in all, and out of $3,000 played as it was the night before, Will takes another $700 from Hannibal in games before he is replaced at the table, even with Hannibal actively trying to get the measure of Will's plays in a way he didn't on Wednesday. Every bit as gradual as he had been warned - a war waged in small concessions over glasses of alcohol and amusements. It's a relief to have more than half of it left to change back to bills - he's as close to breaking even as one gets with minimums as high as they are and sparkling eyed devils manning the table, but so it goes, Hannibal thinks with a fond sigh. The house always wins as he's been told.

"You are very talented with cards, even if you don't think much of them," Hannibal says with the tip of a wine glass, returning his billfold to the breast pocket of his blazer. Sliding from the table with careful fingers, Will takes another $500 in chips, his tips. Hannibal likes to think it's a gift for the time well spent, but he's aware of himself enough to feel the edges of a bid for the younger man's attention.

"Not at all, now you have me thinking I'm just playing with a less interesting deck," Will teases.

"With a talent like yours, it seems a shame to not at least have a peek at the history behind your trade." Hannibal stands with a wink.

Will tongues the side of his mouth, considering.

"Maybe I'm reading this wrong, and I certainly do that when it's not cards," he says a little hesitantly, "but I work early tomorrow. Which, unlike the rest of humanity, means I start at 2 pm and only have to go until 10 pm. The girls make more money in the witching hours on the weekends. Would you like to get coffee?" and he asks like he expects a no.

Will smiles, scratching at his neck, and adds, "I can't promise obscure card history facts, or even that the coffee is very good, but it seems remiss of me to not see if there's a reason you walked at least four casinos to get your money taken from you twice in a row."

"I'm not averse to it," Hannibal says, before smiling mildly and cutting the air with his hand. "Perhaps that is too retiring of me - I would be pleased to, though I think you'll find my reasoning is quite vacuous in the grand scheme of things, and I hate to disappoint."

He adds, "I think I can frame it in a way that pleases my current employer. You might actually be able to provide some insight."

Hannibal thinks of Jack Crawford, laboring in the delusion of random chance and stumbled-upon providence, and has a notion. An interview, perhaps, from a frank insider's perspective. Hannibal's curious what Will thinks of this killer of women, and the kind of people he knows that would be akin. Will's watchful eyes have such a sharp edge to cut with, and he wants to know how he'd slice this.

They call it a date, and plan to meet at the apex of the fountains from the street at noon. Hannibal watches with interest as he passes two of his spoils of the evening, black chips, to the hostess that brings the wine, that speaks smoky slow to him. Will tells her to be careful and call it a night. She calls him baby, and makes promises to make it up to him. Another lady gently herded away, and Hannibal cannot find it in him to be upset at Will's charity.

The lights of Las Vegas Boulevard are beautiful and strange, and the long walk back is hardly a trial at all in the warm night air.

It gives him a moment to think of Jack Crawford's Muses and their ungentle fall into white dresses and refrigerated cabinets, rolled out as inventory instead of the inspirations they started as. He considers Will too, a random act in the long play of his life, and what about him draws his attention.

Good Will and his own earthly condition, born a second rank Servant, but crafted for the sixth rank Chevalier, paying his co-workers to go home and be safe, surely. He'd like to draw him. He'd like to know if his mouth is sweet and bitter as it looks between rounds of cards, contorting to the face he believes is expected, but may not actually feel comfortable in.

Hannibal feels invigorated, aggravating investigation or no. It's been a while since the last time he has.

Morning on the Strip is a stark contrast to its nighttime dress. Few are on the street, most of the lights go out, and the crush of people seeking the attention of other people goes quiet for want of sleep and rest from the casual poisons scattered up and down the street.

Hannibal makes it a point to go out, in an attitude of observance, to see the kind of animal that wanders in these hours. They are mostly housekeeping, dealers and dancers finally coming off their shift with coffees clasped before them like crosses. Nobody looks at each other, or comments on the walks of shame and mentally ill decorating the edges of the walkways. He thinks he could plant a body here, and none would ask about it until the sun was higher still.

How many times has Will come out from the timeless mid-light of the casino to find the blue of an early morning? Does it seem more beautiful without the constant battering of minds against his vision? Is it made more disgusting when the waste and trash of the crowds isn't covered by feet? What does he do when he's not fleecing the flock, and there's no one but himself to please?

What *displeases* him? comes unbidden behind that. Hannibal rolls that thought under his tongue to contemplate, and drinks hot tea from a paper cup. It is bitter, water too hot when poured over the leaves. He did not care for the coffee in the hotel room, the lobby, or any of the myriad Starbucks decorating the walk to this point. He does not want to spoil his mouth before his date, but finds it has been all the same.

Will is early, as early as 11:35 am can be perceived for a coffee meeting at noon. While Hannibal is already unnaturally attuned to liking Will and his habits, this courtesy is the first that he sees that is separate from the casino floor and the careful dance of chatter over cards. It's endearing seeing his combed but frizzy and curled hair appear on the walkway in front of the fountains, looking mildly harried despite the time. He looks half his age, less like a mask and more like a person.

"You're not wearing your glasses," Hannibal says, pleased to see his face in full. It is a lovely, angular one in the morning sun, sparse beard hairs turned red and blonde in places where the sun hits and illuminates them.

"Oh good," Will says, pushing some of that curly dark hair from his face. "I see we're still on the obvious statement phase of the day."

"It seems like the right place to start in the absence of the usual tools. I am, all the same, surprised. You look much younger without them."

“Young enough to require instruction via obscure Florentine flash cards, or just young enough to not look like I went to bed at 4 am? I’ll take either, by the way,” he says, rubbing at his eyes in the glare of the sun. “I’m feeling my age this morning.”

“Then to coffee we must go,” says Hannibal, and Will agrees with a kind of silent gratitude that is common in the hungover and in the sleepless amongst them. They walk and talk lightly of what the hours of a dealer typically merit, how they choose them, how long Will has done this to become such a valued player at the high stakes tables. It’s all very complimentary, though Will shrinks away from it in parts, crossing the boulevard with Hannibal to find a very small, hidden coffee shop to the side of Bally’s. (*He doesn’t like to talk deeply about himself - you understand.*)

Surprisingly, it *is* good, this coffee shop of Will’s - a small roaster with only a small counter to serve with, but a fresh aroma and none of the syrups and blended drinks that Hannibal thinks would be counterproductive to recovering from a night of heavy drinking. They take cups to the boulevard again, and down to the Eiffel Tower in miniature across the street from the fountains to buy croissants and have a seat at the cafe there. The croissants are terrible - Will cautions about this very carefully. “They won’t let us have the chairs without ‘em though, so I guess they’re here for decoration. Very Parisian of us.”

“One should act in the mode they wish to be seen in,” Hannibal nods. “Even if not in the correct taste.”

They face each other for a time, shaded by red umbrellas.

“So why the stalking?” asks Will, free of context. It startles a laugh out of Hannibal.

“Well, who else is going to make sure the wine isn’t soured in the bottle?” he replies in kind. “I’m sure you noted I am a capable counter next to the standard dealer - it’s a rare distinction to be able to relieve me of my funds as you did.”

Will takes a sip of coffee. “I almost told you to leave last night,” he admits. “Thought you might be trying to figure out my tells, and weren’t afraid to lose some money to do it. Some of the pros around here do it outside the high stakes table to make it look less obvious, but it’s one of the reasons they rotate us around as much as they do.”

“Shouldn’t be making friends at work?” asks Hannibal, taking a sip of his own. “As much as I’d like to crack the code of Will from New Orleans, I’m more curious why there’s also a Will from

Wolf Trap, Virginia."

Will gives him a raised brow - *continue* , it says.

Hannibal turns his cup on the cafe table in clean quarter turns, chin turned down, but eyes turned up to watch Will. "One of the other investigators on my business trip is something of a gambling fiend and a keen eye. She noted me on Wednesday night playing with you, and said you had torn her a new one the night before."

Something connects. "The FBI agent?" asks Will. "Keep an eye on her - she's a bit more than a fiend, but she's a skilled one." He sucks at his bottom lip for a moment, teeth worrying the edge. "I guess that means you're with her on a case? I don't know any law enforcement conferences in the area right now."

Hannibal nods. "Yes, that's correct, as a consultant - Are you familiar with the girls that have been turning up in parking lots?"

Will's face goes dark, scrunched at the nose. "Yeah," he sneers. "Yeah, we all know about that. No one really wants to talk about it, but the game floor people talk up and down the Strip. Visit the same watering holes."

"Any particular reason to not share?" Hannibal asks gently. "I don't doubt you. My own interviews with colleagues show there's an aversion of sorts to pointing fingers, but there's also so many people that it's hard to do any sort of conclusive research. There's an urgency for normalcy, not because of concern, but to avoid inconveniences."

"Hiring girls is easy," Will shrugs, "There's a lot of aspirations of wealth, independence, making it on their own in a city with not a ton of job opportunities. Pretty women do great, average ones keep pace, but keeping them on the staff is hard. Not a lot of money unless you're upper management, good with cards, or terrible with cards and good with your mouth or legs as a singer, or a dancer, or the other kind of dancer."

(*He means to shock you.*)

"Crass," Hannibal replies.

“True,” says Will with another twisting smile. “But it’s a crass place. I’m not judging - most of us are here for a job, but the people coming in are here for a fantasy. It’s family vacations, bachelor and bachelorette parties, college rushes, business conventions, and weekend warriors from here clear up to Fremont Street, and not one of them cares if you make rent. When they tip well, it’s because they had a nice time and everyone wants to pretend to be the highroller, not out of some sense of altruism.”

“Is that why you’re so kind to them? The hostesses,” adds Hannibal, thinking of the woman from last night, given half of Will’s tips that Hannibal had meant for the other man.

Will snorts. “They’re people. Why wouldn’t you treat your co-workers well? Some from bad homes, some from totally normal ones. Some just serve cocktails, and some of them like to pole dance for the extra cash. Some like to fuck for it. Everybody’s just getting by until they can leave for something better. I hardly want the ones I know to get killed by a serial rapist and murderer.”

Hannibal nods, thundering of the water across the street starting up again. “Seems reasonable,” he says, drink finished. In the early afternoon sun, Will has freckles on the bridge of his nose. Corinne Kwon had a Claddagh ring and a birthmark between her toes on her right foot. Jane Doe #1 used bronzer and powder to cover girlish rosacea. A person behind each flaw.

After coffee, time necessitates a return to the west side of the Strip. Hannibal has appointments with Alana and Jack, and Will of course has his early shift. The foot traffic is light in the afternoon sun, but Hannibal sweats uncomfortably into the collar of his shirt anyway, made worse by the petrol smell of cars growing more and more abundant and interlocked as Friday afternoon begins to work its way into a Friday night.

“More serial killer talk for you, more old guys thinking I’m an upstart and not tipping for me,” Will groans as they begin their ascent of the stairs to the pedestrian overpass. He lights a cigarette, trying to walk downwind of Hannibal, but resolved to smoking all the same. Hannibal shrugs it off as a minor vice - he has many of his own.

“I hope I don’t resemble that remark,” Hannibal quips. “Besides, maybe I enjoy the serial killer talk. It certainly keeps some very droll people on their toes.”

(*All true - you smile.*)

Will turns, walking backwards with his hands behind his head, white shirt stretching beneath the denim. “Not at all, you just infer I’m underutilizing my skill, give me extensive cultural trivia, and tip extremely well. Maybe we can trade - you steal the money, and I’ll talk about how to kill people I don’t respect or value up and down Las Vegas Boulevard.”

Hannibal stops, leaning against the barrier wall with a hip. “Do you think about killing a lot, Will?”

“Doesn’t everyone?” he replies, looking both inscrutable and amused again. (*You could taste the citrus from his mouth, from the aspirating of rind as his words twist.*) “He’s kind of sneaking into my neighborhood and scaring the kids, your murderer. Life’s hard enough without having to worry if some degenerate is going to live out an ugly fantasy, even if it is a pretty standard kind.”

This peaks Hannibal’s interest. “And what is a standard fantasy for men predating on vulnerable women, do you think?”

Will looks at him, like Hannibal should know the answer. (*You do.*) “Submission, control, owning something they think they deserve. He’s not really elevating them out of that, this guy of yours. I suspect he’s trying to play house the way he wants to and they tried to deny him.”

“Punishment for not allowing him to have his way,” Hannibal surmises, in agreement.

Will nods. “He works a regular job down here, something familiar with the flow in and out of the casinos, maybe management, probably security,” Will explains. “Waits for the weekends to pick who to make his mess with when there’s thousands of people to pull the ladies in, picks someone naive and not very careful around the regulars...there’s something about her that makes him feel secure. Probably watches the cars to see if they leave at night, but you learn to recognize the girls that are hooking or stripping part time when you’re around all the time.”

“He won’t be interesting,” he continues, leaning back on the rail, stucco scratching at his arms. He’s not really here with Hannibal right now, but somewhere else, even if he is on the street of the intersection of Las Vegas Boulevard and Flamingo Road. “He’ll have done it before and been ashamed of it. But he wants something, and shame is not really enough to stop people when nobody’s looking.”

“Is murder not something to be ashamed of?”

Will laughs. “You can’t do anything here that’s not shameful,” he says, balancing the cigarette between his lips and bringing his head down to observe the concourse of the road.

The sorry sedans of workers rolling in for the afternoon to begin a sordid nighttime shift mingle with flashy rentals, everyone equalized by the incoming weekend traffic. They shimmer in the summer heat, gridlocked and saturated with the smell of gasoline. Nobody’s moving, but nobody seems able to sit in silence, the cacophony of young people, drunks, the impatient, slamming down on horns and yelling from windows the same way a storm blows in. Hannibal’s teeth itch at the sight of them.

Will just shrugs. “It’s what they built the place for. It’s why you’re here. It’s what you want to experience. Why stop with murder when you keep getting away with everything else that you should be ashamed of?”

(*Why indeed. You don’t let anything stop you. How uneven of you to expect more restraint of someone with half your means, and twice the compulsion* .)

The cigarette smoke is still disgusting, but Hannibal finds himself tasting the air, wondering what it would be like to wander into Will Graham’s mouth with the next inhale, chasing what shameful things Will himself has done, and what it would be like to show Will what shameful things Hannibal likes to do in turn.

(*You’d like to plan something, and what better audience than this strange, oracle-eyed creature that reads desires like tattoos on the skin, exposed and engraven? What perception of your own could you share to receive that attentive gaze once more?*)

“Why indeed,” he says, and watches Will draw another drag of the cigarette into his lungs, envious of what it can touch.

“Don’t come to my table tonight,” says Will, before leaving him at the northeast corner of the fountains. Hannibal almost startles at the abruptness of it. “You’ll get me in trouble if you keep

showing up, even if you are losing money. They'll think I'm planning something nefarious, and people talk."

It makes sense, he guesses, but is resentful of the idea of going solo on a Friday night on this loathsome trip. Another idea comes to mind though, and he fishes into his pocket for a pen and paper.

"No indeed," says Hannibal. "You should come to mine instead." And at his companion's puzzled look, he instead offers a business card, cell phone number scrawled on its backside, and a meeting time with ***Caesars*** underlined. "Don't be late."

Will, to Hannibal's satisfaction, doesn't ask exactly where, only nodding and turning to the entrance of the casino. Half the fun is guessing.

Part 3

Of course Hannibal considers Will's honesty on the pedestrian bridge long after the moment passes. With his gentle manner with the hostesses, his attentiveness to their names and their comfort, Hannibal has imagined a scenario where Will from New Orleans, Louisiana or Will from Wolf Trap, Virginia takes his gentlest public face and turns it inside out to turn his young shepherded girls inside out as well.

Hannibal feels the capability of this in those clever hands. He just also doesn't see the intent to perform such violence.

(*Messy, unoriginal, uninspired. Standard, he had said, and you agreed quietly.*)

Will is content to watch his flock, and make sure the patrons treat them nicely, and share his tips. Brotherly, sympathetic to the lifestyle and the necessity and depravity that often comes with it. He keeps his manipulative tendencies for visitors and their money. He keeps his desire to play people safely contained in playing cards with them.

Corinne Kwon would be safe serving his tables. Two Jane Does, and two lonely, disavowed girl-children playing at adulthood would be walked to their cars.

But what if?

It's a far more entertaining prospect, if not a realistic one. Hannibal blandly nods through the fourth interview he has attended today, mind elsewhere, but refocuses when he senses Alana's mounting frustration.

"Shit, Corinne missed shifts all the time," says the security officer at The Cosmopolitan. He is late middle-aged and balding. He wears a large watch and the red nose of a frequent drinker. "Hardly worth looking into when she's coked out nine times out of ten that it happens."

“Why wouldn’t she have been fired?” asks Alana, soft but firm. “Seems like a liability.”

“Because the turnover is outrageous,” the man laughs. “If they’re not at work, half of them are gambling or clubbing or drinking themselves to death. Who in their right mind wants to work here if not for the tips to keep the party going?”

Hannibal wonders who takes care of these people when their keepers’ don’t have empathy intermingled with their perceptive avarice, like Will.

(*No one.*)

(*Themselves, you amend, like you did, which is still no one.*)

“Of course,” Alana says with a tight smile. Hannibal thanks him for his time, and tells his friend and student to not take it personally. “It’s just the attitude of the institution,” he remarks. “There doesn’t seem to be much loyalty amongst the lot, if our week so far is anything to judge by.”

Hannibal takes the FBI team to dinner. This is only practical - he can only direct the timeline of his Friday evening if others are accounted for, and so he draws everyone of some importance into Caesars Palace for the night. Besides, Jack Crawford has saved for his special dinner, and how kind of Hannibal to make it happen at no cost to Jack’s frugality? Maybe he can find a shark-faced young man to whittle down his savings too.

“Fancy digs!” says Beverly Katz, looking at the drink menu at the restaurant, a capable and, what Hannibal assumes by merit of the brand, trustworthy sushi establishment. “Excellent, they have the miso tarts, just like in Malibu,” says Jimmy Price, very thankful and complimentary to Hannibal’s choice for the night, and sick to death of running labs at the coroner’s office. Alana, freshly washed and smiling in her emerald green dress, declares an intent to meet with an old friend tonight. “Went to college together,” she explains. “Just so happens she’s free tonight” and Hannibal congratulates her on the serendipity. “I don’t know how I feel about raw sea urchin,” says Brian Zeller, and Hannibal marvels at the irony of what more creative horrors he could have eaten in Hannibal’s kitchen alone.

(*Someday, you think, you really should make them a meal to introduce yourself properly. It tickles you pink to consider.*)

Agent Crawford, tucking into his omakase meal, is simply very grateful. “I’m sorry this hasn’t been a very productive trip so far for the team,” he says between bites of ginger and salmon belly. “I’d like to say I’m surprised by the amount of organizational and social dysfunction around here, but I suppose the locals are subject to the same foolishness that the people coming in for a wild weekend are.”

Down by a paltry $5300 by Friday night but only thanks to careful play to maximize his conversation times, and excluding tips, Hannibal just smiles. “I suspect you’ll find we are as well, Jack. Had any late nights yet? I heard the craps table at The Cromwell is a wild scene.”

Everyone is sheepish and smiling and talks about lighter things. Hannibal just can’t wait to be rid of them and begin his evening in earnest, foolish obsession awaiting.

At 11:00 pm on the dot, Hannibal approaches the hotel lobby in front of Caesars Palace, set far from the slot machines and strangely beautiful despite the artifice of the place. In the center round, the three graces of the Nine Muses stand barely clothed and timelessly white. The side closest to the door blackens with the exhaust from the valet, knees stained like she’s fallen, water pouring from a fountain beneath them. He thinks of Corinne and her compatriots, cold in the drawers.

The benches to the sides of the statues house families just arrived, but no Will.

Hannibal tries to chase his disappointment away. It was a lot to expect of a virtual stranger, strange kinship or not. He supposes he couldn’t have been vaguer about the meeting place if he tried, and Will is hardly as familiar with the case details as Hannibal himself. They speak of women in Will’s trade and their talents, but not their suits in cards, or Hannibal and Alanas’s one thought. The symbolism after their conversations this afternoon and the night before seemed fairly-

A tap to his shoulder.

(*A surprise to be relieved, to be understood.*)

“It was either this one or Caesar in bronze at the front of the casino floor. He seemed a little off-topic - we didn’t really talk about the Emperor card in your tarot or Mantegna cards, though I saw on Google that there is one.”

Hannibal turns, delighted, both at the observation and that Will looked into it of his own volition. “Just beneath the Pope in value, though I disagree with the positioning of his condition. I suppose the emperor anointed by God would supersede the political one at the time.”

Will steps into the lowlights of the lobby, looking a little tired by no worse for wear than he has over the last three days. The uniform is shed for the night, and replaced by a faded coral shirt beneath a black suit jacket of no particular note - something to be worn for dinner at a nicer restaurant, or to a funeral. He glances into the timeless faces of Aglala, Thalia, and Euphrosyne, made unrecognizable in their replicated smoothness.

“They talk about how the entertainment and fashion industry eat women’s youth. I don’t think they really give enough consideration to the service industry instead,” he comments, and waves at one of the lobby attendants.

“It’s definitely more ubiquitous across America and Western Europe,” says Hannibal. “I am sure you’re in a position to see the nature of the beast more than most, and it stains your interactions with every young lady who makes the mistake of taking the name badges.”

“Your card said you’re a psychiatrist,” Will says with a cutting look. “I suppose I should have expected it with how cutting all your questions are. You like to bring it back on the person you’re discussing.”

“It’s only polite to discuss your guest instead of yourself,” Hannibal muses with a half grin, and checks his watch. Almost time.

Will shrugs. “So what’s your agenda, Doctor Hannibal Lecter?” he asks wryly. “Shall we continue to talk about what a bad life decision all of us on the payroll of the building are making and frame it as some kind of ironic tragedy that some mid-to-late century poet has probably made an anthology of?”

“Oh hardly, I was thinking we do what the rest of the crowd does on a Friday in Vegas, and make for a loud watering hole with more bartenders and poorly lit bathrooms than common sense.”

“Thank god,” Will says with an eye roll. “Something I can actually relate to.” But he smiles, and they turn to join the flow of people crossing through the resort to the entertainments beyond.

Bottle service is easy to come by when you have money like Hannibal has money. This is something that is generationally understood, with the newcomers still starry eyed with the lights and the debauchery of Las Vegas, and the older visitors wizened to. Hannibal may be a first timer, but this has generally been a universal truth. Everyone chooses their haunts accordingly as they age, while college students throw their weekends and their not yet faded bodies into pursuit of joy. The throbbing base overtakes logic, the drinks overtake hesitation.

Case in point, the young people throwing their dollar bills at comely young women and drinking overpriced Grey Goose are at best a testament to debauchery and frivolity, and are easily ousted when the maitre’d glimpses Hannibal in the dark entry of the club. Glimpses Hannibal’s watch, glimpses Hannibal’s confidence, glimpses Hannibal’s erstwhile guest.

With a crisp handful of hundred dollar bills for the front of house, and his already timely reservation with a very obeisant call to the concierge hours before that was very determined to find him space, a quiet corner of the outdoor mezzanine, as quiet as any corner can be in a nightclub overlooking a major avenue, is saved for them. Per his request, a yellow-necked bottle of Veuve Cliquot sits sweating in a pewter bowl of ice for Hannibal, and to the side a Glenlivet 18 for Will, who looking bashful and stellar in the white, black, red, and pink chiaroscuro of the club and the Strip’s lighting, has been unusually mute company.

Cat’s got his tongue, Hannibal supposes.

(*Afraid of wealth, envious of it, disdaining of it, you’re not sure which. Will from New Orleans and Will from Wolf Trap doesn’t have a lot of money yet, despite his efforts, and inwardly revolts at yours. You wonder what you could throw at him, how much you could make him squirm at the waste. You delight at the image of pouring out champagne as one pours out seals of Revelation onto him to see his eyelashes spike as they would with tears, tasting it on his mouth.*)

Well, that’s a thought.

(*What happens in Vegas, they say. When in Rome, they say.*)

The honeycomb of the walls alongside the building is a long line of glowing lamps and couches, while they sit next to the glass wall separating them from the street. Between them, their marble table on golden legs and a lamp swinging above. Very Marrakesh, despite the setting. Across from him, Will leans forward to match Hannibal's posture.

"So what were you going to do if I didn't show up, or I went to the wrong meeting place?" he asks. "Just take up a several grand table and drink yourself under it solo?"

Hannibal finds an answering laugh leave him without thinking. "Ah, I'm fond of my own company. I am sure I could find the bottom of this bottle if I had a mind to and simply take in the sights. It's my first sojourn into Las Vegas, after all, and I've found most things, save the day job, to be entertaining."

"Done anything regrettable yet, other than spend your food and hotel budget?" Will takes an appreciative sip of his scotch, and gives a small cheers when he finds it to his satisfaction. "And thank you for the drink. It's certainly more than I deserve."

Hannibal shakes his head. "I find good company is hard to find. One of my colleagues would have been an acceptable replacement for you, but she has other sins to pursue with old friends tonight. Happenstance intervened for her tonight."

Will gives Hannibal a searching look, considering. "Sin City's kind of a bore if you're not willing to sin a bit...Do you regret the loss of her company to mine?"

"Hardly. We have opportunities to see each other often at home, and you are a rather unique find."

"You have to keep a little junk in the toolbox to keep the mystery alive," says Will, taking another drink, but smiling as his teeth catch the glass rim. Hannibal admires the bone whiteness of them - tidy incisors against a crystal wall. "A surprise each time when you open it to make you check it again periodically."

Both of them sit comfortably for a time, watching people shuffle between tables. These weekend children are loud, and drunk, and very content in their expenditures. Hannibal is too in his own way, though he likes to think the general intellect and sobriety of the company adds to it. If he changed anything, he would put Will in something dark blue and velvet, shiny lapelled and cutting. He is a handsome man, determined to live in mediocrity, and that chafes at Hannibal.

(*What do you have to be bothered by? Is he not the sum of his own conditions? Need the Servant or Craftsman wear the trappings of the Lord?*)

“What is your sin, Will?” he asks, words cutting their way across his tongue.

Will frowns, turning his glass in hand, listening to the large ice cube hit against the sides of it. *Clink, clink, clink* . “What is this, therapy?”

“Just a little tête-à-tête. Perhaps you’ll feel like asking me mine before the end of the night.”

The answer doesn’t seem to take much time - Will has thought of this before.

“Watching people make mistakes,” he shrugs. *Clink, clink.* “Knowing which people, knowing what kind of sin, and then not stopping them when I see it happening.”

“It’s rather the nature of your game, indulging someone’s worst habits. You have been very kind with some,” Hannibal says, thinking of the bottle-blonde housewife, looking so fondly on Will in his vest with his nice boy smile and his nice boy voice. He thinks of the young brown-haired hostess, and her compatriot down the street, speaking softly. Surely there are others that he wears his kid gloves for that Hannibal can’t account for in a scant half a week.

(*But never fully kind - it’s a city of vice, and Will is but the keeper of one wing of a vast network of buildings full of people dying to misbehave. You watch him smile, and feel much the same, wondering at how he’d see blood in the neon glow of the Strip, if it would be beautiful to him* .)

“Less so than the ones I’ve allowed to indulge,” he shrugs, neck buried in the safety of the suit jacket and his hair. “And it doesn’t stay on the Strip, no matter what the catchy jingles and shiny signs say...some go on to wreck everything around them.” The din of pulsing base and laughing

voices shade him as much as any tree would in a desert. He would look small if Hannibal wasn't so intent on him now.

"What hurts you most to watch?" Hannibal asks. "My therapeutic advice, if you'd have it, is to stop that thing, specifically," he adds, like that's easy. To Hannibal, it is - he's cut down people for minor infractions. It hurts to watch cigarettes discarded from windows, people shoved in lines, swear words traded over minor disputes. He can only imagine the kind of ugliness that Will has watched with a smile and a polite nod. Ever the face of a game, not a person. It must be vexing, to always be a brand instead of a man, or conscientious objector resigned to silence. "Consider the wreckage, why it bothers you."

"Even if it indulges your own bad habits to stop it?" he asks, and it's a vulnerable question. Watching the pulse tick in his neck, Hannibal realizes it is more so than it sounds at first blush. Something also considered, as his sin is. What dark thoughts he has aren't in his face, but most assuredly they are dark.

"The best kind to indulge," says Hannibal with a growing flutter of excitement. "What better than the catharsis of an itch scratched and a person saved from their worst self?"

Hannibal finds himself wanting to be indulged. Hannibal wants to watch his heart race. He wants to watch Will make a decision.

Will must see it. "Are you in need of someone to scratch an itch, Hannibal?" he softly asks over a second drink, condensation dripping over his fingers. Nothing in his tone is uninviting, or judgemental. He is calculating. His breath smells like spirits, and Hannibal's smile chases it.

"Ah, Will," he says. "Not just anyone, though the permissive attitude of the city has taken its hold, I'm sure. That being said," he purrs, "I was rather hoping it'd be you."

(*You don't plan for things like this. You think that's why the reveal and the thrill of it is sweeter. You are ravenous for vulnerability, and clever hands, and perceptive eyes, and the random chance of it happening at all is the reward.*)

There's an interlude to the dreamlike state of the two of them wandering back to the Bellagio, both putting feet forward and idle chatter to fill the blanks with literature, histories, how the great minds of Greece and Rome would roll in their graves at the spectacle of their current surroundings. A city fit for Commodus, but aspirations of being Marcus Aurelius. The interruption of this dialogue is unpleasant in the way that seeing a soft-mannered bird like a dove or a sparrow be taken in the claws of a falcon, but not quickly die to its hunt. It is to die something slow and painful on the ground.

(*Without purpose. A distraction. A waste. The repetition of a story you imagine you've seen begin to play out four times in the morgue, and once on the tarmac. Had you no designs for your night, you might be tempted to give chase.*)

The lobby clerk that Will waves to at their first meeting of the evening in the halls adjacent to the hotel concierge. She is drying the eyes of a young woman that could be a guest, or could be an employee. One strap of her dress is ripped, a drink tray prone on the ground. She is piteously weeping, and apologizes in a mantra of decorum. *Sorry, sorry, sorry, I'm fine.*

"What happened?" asks Will, stricken for a moment.

"The usual security jackass," says the older woman, still dressed in her concierge finest and petting at the blonde french braid under her hands. "It's nothing, Will," she adds, escorting the girl away, her pretty white dress and nude colored pumps overshadowed by the streaky black of her makeup.

Everyone seems to know what's happening in the scene save him, a watcher at the edge of a workplace drama. For one hateful minute, Hannibal contemplates what it means if it ruins the mood, but he's as effervescent in his mild drunkenness as he gets, and trusts Will won't abandon his company.

(*Who would be accountable for your wrath, and how do you exorcise it? Is it rude to simply have things happen in your path, at no personal detriment other than a mild inconvenience? Does your wanting something take over everything else happening in the gravity of a world turning?*)

What follows instead is curious. Will's eyes are open but closed for a moment, something reptilian chasing through them before he pats the woman on the back and nods, and tells her to call the young lady a cab - he'll pay. The look stays with Hannibal all the way across the bridges to the Bellagio, in the noisy rush for the elevators, in the silence of the hotel room halls.

The niceties must be observed of course. Hannibal pours wine, takes coats to hang, and opens the curtains to the clamor of the Friday night activity, where any moment now the Bellagio fountains will begin their ritual again, and again after that, and again after that. It's a perverse clock tower, singing Judy Garland and Beethoven in equal measure in a parody of normalcy. Will strolls the room with the trepidation of a man in the doctor's office initially, considering the unused spaces, the glow from the fountain.

"I don't often get to see it from here," he says.

Hannibal selects a red vintage from the in-room cooler, something requested before he arrived, but yet to be opened. "I'd imagine not. They seem to keep you in the bowels of the buildings, designed to keep visitors in, and distractions out."

Will nods, and favors the curtain with a white hand. "I'd like to ask now, before...well, I'd like to ask. Is that alright?"

It's said so seriously and matter-of-fact, that for a moment Hannibal wonders just what it is he's promised this attractive stranger in his room. Hannibal turns and nods, wine opener and cork in hand to give Will a long look, before setting it down to observe. His hands itch as they often do in the moments before action. It's a curious anticipation that often ends in bloodshed, but now he only wants to end in tearing layer after layer away to see the creature beneath.

Will turns away from the window, the fountain dancing below, the lights cutting gold across his face. "What is your sin, Hannibal? What gets your appetites going? Gambling addiction? Like to watch women swing themselves around for money? Take a little off the top of the books to travel and educate your intelligence? Lording obscure knowledge over the randoms in your waking dream of a life?" He swallows, hands at his sides. "I'm having a hard time picturing you in the usual vices. I know there's one, because there always is, but you have me wondering if I'm wrong again."

Hannibal walks up, slow, committing the image to memory. He stands next to him, looking down, and turns his head to lean in close, closer, into the shell of an ear hidden by dark brown curls.

"Nonsense," he says, and savors the warmth of the cartilage of the helix, the way that Will's throat nervously ticks with his pulse beneath it. Will leans into it, and that's as good as winning in his eyes.

“My appetites are literal,” he whispers. “I am always hungry.”

And so he takes his fill with sharp teeth. First at the man’s cupid’s bow with plush lips, to the firm bone of his chin, to the apex of a collarbone. Will softly breathes into his mouth, and Hannibal takes that in too.

Coat off, shirt off, taking and taking until for the first time this week, he has the upper hand, gifted or otherwise, and it is delicious. Will is all pale expanses and simple flesh more warm and real than all of the imitations below them and miles down on either side. Hannibal feels a particular satisfaction in watching the shirt fall to the floor, a long neck for him to taste continuing into a taut stomach, and the fine hairs that match his face - brown, reddish in the light of the lamp, and the night glow of the fountains below.

Taking Will’s cock in his mouth is a sight better than the sound of Judy Garland crooning outside. That the younger man pants through the feeling with shock and with the gasping of one who’s lungs have collapsed is a delight unto itself. It is so easy to guide him back into the expanse of the bed when Hannibal has had his fill to start. It is so natural to feel his own lips redden and split with the chafing of Will’s hidden teeth and the dry Nevada air, and seek out other extremes in his clever hands, against Hannibal’s purposeful movement.

If anything, the gift of it is what makes it taste good. He cannot picture this being bargained for. He hopes Will understands, and Hannibal loves him here with a mouth and mind made for shaping.

There isn’t an afterglow.

Hannibal keeps him as long as he can, a snake coiled around a pheasant, but eventually time drags the fountains into motion again, and so too does Will. Will seems like he’s not the type for pillow talk or room service in the morning. He flees the awkwardness of confronting his decisions, the pounding headache of too little water, too much scotch, too much ringing out *in-above-beneath* each other. Hannibal admires the marks on the side of his neck, and allows it.

It’s meant to be a fleeting experience, these weekends in Las Vegas. There’s entire marketing campaigns that explicitly promise it.

(*If you feel any loss at that, you do not mention it. You hide it somewhere secret to be turned over and over like a stone later.*)

He offers water, rides home, to meet for breakfast in the morning, but all Will does is shake his head with a smile and slides into his funeral suit coat, collared shirt thrown under arm and only the whiteness of a wifebeater tank top beneath it. “People to check on,” he says. “Time to get home,” he says with an apologetic shrug. Long night ahead with a drive, and a long day at work tomorrow. It’s the weekend, after all.

“Hannibal,” asks Will, at the door before disappearing from view. “What countenance would the cardmakers choose for you?”

“Oh,” Hannibal smiles, leaning on the console table of the suite entrance, feeling the brush of white gladiolas in an array of spears behind him, both sharp and soft. What a question to ask, and how wonderful to think and answer it. “In the Mantegna set, perhaps the Duke, or Rhetoric if they were of a mind to take the crown from the woman already shown in it. But in the Sforza-Visconti?” he asks, with a roll of a shoulder, terry cloth of the robe brushing a sore spot from the crush of teeth. “Certainly *The Card with No Name* .”

“And what is that?”

“Death, of course.”

Will considers him for a long time.

Eventually he nods, and disappears into the hall. Hannibal doesn’t know what his sharp eyes saw, only that it takes root somewhere.

Hannibal wakes in the morning to his cell phone buzzing urgently at his ear.

“Doctor Lecter,” Jack barks from the tinny buzz of outside. “I’m sorry to wake you, but we’ve got a murder related to the case.”

He rubs his eyes, pushes back his hair, and considers. HIs mouth is sour with wine, and his shoulder shot from holding his own weight. (*How good it was, to hold it over Will’s comely face and flushed chest. To ride, and be ridden, a base thinking animal free of the day’s inconsequential talk.*) Something of an ache settles in his legs and waist as well, and he is getting old to be running around at early morning hours for murders that aren’t his own, but alas. “Another of the hostesses?”

“No, a middle aged man. But get this, labs just came back, and he matches evidence from all five bodies. It’s the unsub.”

Hannibal pauses. Thinks. Feels out the soreness of a back and feet worked too hard for his age the day before, the hurts of fucking riddled across him as they were with Will.

“Then suicide?” he asks. A base end for a base offender. It would irritate Hannibal to have spent so much time for him to merely end himself, but he supposes he wouldn’t have met Will or gotten the full sin city experience without him.

But Jack doesn’t agree with him. His silences are often full of frustration, like the sneering frowns that have grown familiar come to Jack even with no audience to see. Hannibal feels the edge of one now.

“I think you should come down here,” says Jack, after a pause. “It’s just outside your hotel. Hell, you might be able to see the police cars from your window if you’re on the fountain side of things.”

The fountain sits still, turned off for the early morning, but also to discourage passers-by from stopping and further dirtying the crime scene. It is fortunate, Hannibal thinks, that all the gawkers are sleeping away in their beds from high places, ignorant of the actual violence that hides barely covered in their congregation. Hungover. Tired. Put away wet. (*Let’s not be smug - you have been too.*) The quiet of a Saturday morning is not so different from that of Friday, though the ground is dirtier, more littered by cigarettes and fast food containers, and what is undoubtedly vomit.

Wincing against the oppressive heat, even with the sun only beginning to clear the top of the faux Eiffel Tower across the boulevard, Hannibal contemplates if he might not do so himself from the excesses of champagne, wine, and restless sleep. It would be a relief really, only practical to have it over and done with. Perhaps the vice-hungry walkers of the Vegas streets are practical as well.

(*It takes a toll, all this indulgence.*)

Patrick Sears, without his eyes, and his entrails like a blanket in their even spread, sits on one of the pillars of the fountain retaining way, hands posed to hunch over the crude cane of a craps dice stick. HIs fingers are swollen shut on the bend of it - bruised to blackness, like they were smashed.

Hannibal had not met this man before. He had not even been a person of interest in the investigation up to this point, as uninteresting and rote as a figure can be in the hierarchy of the employees of the Strip. An early road maintenance worker thinks at first he has simply fallen asleep sitting up, and only once he bothers to look beyond the brim of his white shelled helmet does he see that unless Patrick has taken to sleeping with his eyelids open and empty, and has happened upon a bucketful of intestines, the man is very much dead.

“I’D’d as a money and chip counter for the security team at Caesars and Bellagio,” says Crawford, frowning severely at the spectacle. “Well known for being a mean sonofabitch with a severe gambling addiction, if the shift manager is to be believed. We interviewed the chip counter on shift this morning and he said that Sears was more likely to go to the strip clubs after work than go home. Lots of sexual harassment write ups but no charges to pull when we did our initial sweep for suspects. No wife or kids, but no outstanding record either.”

(*“He works a regular job down here, something familiar with the flow in and out of the casinos, maybe management, likely security,” Will explains. “Waits for the weekends to pick who to make his mess with when there’s thousands of people to pull the ladies in, picks someone naive and not very careful around the regulars...there’s something about her that makes him feel secure.”*)

Hannibal swallows around a resentful wave of tiredness, and his own lack of foresight.

“Best that Price can tell at first glance, he’s been gutted with some kind of work knife,” Jack frowns, pacing the edges of the body. “Probably was dead or in shock when it happened, judging by the amount of blood. Definitely wasn’t started here, but no one said they can remember when Sears was set up. People really don’t pay attention to anything here.” This comes with a resentful muttering.

“Nothing like hiding in a crowd,” Hannibal says, and thinks on rooms upon rooms he has traversed and ignorant people he has spoken to, all of it blurring together.

“We did find something on him that was unusual,” Jack adds, frowning and sucking on his tongue between clenched teeth. “I’m not really familiar with this kind of thing, at least not past the standard tarot bullshit from the occult nuts, but Price says his phone is telling him it’s some old card deck.”

Jack passes Hannibal a white sheet of paper.

Found tucked in the pocket of Patrick Sears’ slacks, a hasty printout. Typical bond paper, white, processed by a cheap inkjet printer used in any home or business office, and completely clean of fingerprints. Displayed on it, and shown to scale, a figure leans heavily on a barren tree, chased by hungry dogs. At the bottom, ***I - Misero*** , the Beggar in low resolution from the Mantegna Tarocchi. It is grainy, as though there was not time to find a better quality version online.

Hannibal keeps his face carefully blank.

(*“Sounds about right,” Will says after gathering his win. “Nobody knows more than me about watching as a spectator, people falling from high places in their most attractive outfits and most embarrassing tastes.”*)

He considers.

No, it is too great a coincidence.

“I do think I’ve seen something like this before, Jack,” he says, slowly. “But I haven’t heard it brought up since living in Italy.”

Hannibal supposes he did ask for more opportunities to talk about it. He has been remiss in his expectations of not having a chance again after he and Will’s meeting on the second night, and allusions to it before drinks at the club.

He lies to Jack Crawford about it - not the deck's purpose, just when he heard of it last. He lies on the police report. He lies on the FBI report. He lies and lies and lies and thinks he'd very much like to spend too much money losing hands of Blackjack tonight, if he can only find the free time and which hall to find Will in. He wants to press a burning kiss to him, for closing the investigation, for such justice of vision, for the chance to teach, for being a wondrous thing found at the bottom of an overlooked place.

(*Perhaps you shouldn't have offered breakfast. You should have offered help.*)

Hannibal doesn't find Will in the Bellagio. Neither does he find him in Caesars Palace, Park MGM, New York New York, Excalibur, Luxor, MGM Grand, or any of the casino floors in between. He has walked more city blocks than he can ever recall, looked into the dead eyes of tired card dealers and players, and found them all wanting. It seems unlikely that Will would have a Saturday night off, but so too does it seem unlikely that he would build any suspicion of his involvement by not showing up to work.

"Ah, Will's not on the books the same way the permanent staff of the casinos are since he works for the parent company," the hostess at Park MGM explains, pretty in her plum colored lipstick and gold ringed black braids. Her name badge, unseen the night he is present with Will, reads ***Ardelia Mapp*** , and she too is from Virginia, though ***Alexandria*** is bold and different in the black and gold lettering. "I'd tell you where he is, but we don't get to have our cell phones on us during shifts. I'm sure he's on tonight, but honestly, he could have worked eight hours ago or not start for another five."

Hannibal nods.

"It's just like that around here," she tries to add.

And it is. Just like that.

Time intervenes, as it often does - he doesn't know Will's phone number nor his schedule, and thousands upon thousands walk the concrete sidewalks and tiled hallways, police tape, staff tragedies, with their Friday night trysts cast aside. There is no such thing as memory in a place that

deletes it with deliberation weekend after weekend after weekend. Hannibal will just have to keep what he has safe and away from the allure of incandescent bulbs, chiming slots, young women and men, the drinks, the absurdity.

He returns to the Bellagio, up the tower to his room, and opens the curtain to the dancing fountain below. “What is your sin, Hannibal?” asks Will in witching hour lights and the crooning of lounge singers, and Hannibal is frustrated to think he may have shared the wrong appetite between glasses of heavy Sonoma pinot and the intervals of singing and flowing water in the spaces below.

Hannibal feels a peculiar disappointment when returning to McCarran for the second time. It is mid-afternoon, and there are no girls roasting on the tarmac to be returned to the cold embrace of a refrigerator. This is typically something to be celebrated, but all Hannibal reads from it is an end to his very short tenancy in Las Vegas. It feels like it has been one continuous day for five days, and the sensible reality of itinerary times and connecting flights forces him back into the standard flow of life.

He rolls his carry-on bag down the ramp and onto his flight back to Dallas and thereafter Baltimore. The team, released from their appointment to the case with the death of their perpetrator, are hastily booked into a flight together. Alana looks happy, he is amused to note. Clearly her tryst with the college friend and the conclusion of the case has left her in good spirits.

“How much did you guys win?” asks Beverly, head peeking over the rise of airplane seats, her hair in a sort of disarray saved for those rushing out the door. “I think I’m up by two grand, but they kicked me out of Treasure Island last night. Didn’t like that I wasn’t crapping out, I guess.”

Jimmy, in the seats across the aisle from Hannibal and Alana, just waves her off, sunglasses still firmly in place on his face. “I like to lose money in a way that makes sure I get something in return,” he explains. “So I opted to buy a Fat Tuesday, a Fendi wallet, grab a cab, and camp out at the penny slots on Fremont Street. A very nice older lady named Mabel was very happy to bring me enough Whiskey Sours to borderline black out, and I think I’ve been adopted as the gay uncle to a family from Alabama.”

“A good policy to have,” says Hannibal, smiling. “I feel I did much the same, perhaps sans the familial connections.”

Alana laughs. “So what, you bought a Fat Tuesday and luxury goods?”

Hannibal folds his legs over each other, leaning into the high back of the plane seat and thinking of his expenditures - it’s crass to discuss money directly, but he thinks all in all he is down something in the ballpark of $20,000 between meals, accommodation, entertainment, and his excessive interest in Will from New Orleans or Wolf Trap, who rewards his interest with a very intriguing gift that he doesn’t think he’ll be able to send a timely thank you note for, or an invitation to dinner.

(*You want to thank him. You want to stow him away in a suitcase and pick his brain for what other lessons he’d like to leave cooking in the Nevada heat.*)

He nods, swallowing the disappointment back to be pleasant, accommodating, everything that Hannibal Lecter is supposed to be. “I bought a number of exceedingly expensive glasses of wine while sitting at Blackjack tables where a younger man was all too happy to keep the drinks and conversation going as long as I kept putting chips down.”

Beverly smiles down, whispering conspiratorially to Alana, “Doctor Lecter got honeypotted by the guy I was telling you about from Wednesday night. Did you really go find him again to participate in another self-mugging?”

“You have to be able to afford some losses to make a gain in the long run,” he dryly replies. “Isn’t that what all the financiers like to say to their clients?”

(*You’ve got to be willing to invest to see a return, and your returns were favorable.*)

“Hope you got something out of it,” Beverly says with a wink. Hannibal favors her with a tilted smile.

He sleeps between Vegas and Dallas, and watches the small, flickering of towns and cities in the dark below them on their second connection. He imagines them as a series of very small fragments of the Strip chasing after them, asking for another day of their youth, as it does to all the others that pour in on car exhaust and plane engines.

Without a last name, Hannibal is never quite able to accurately pinpoint Will's origins, current location, or continuing employment. He only knows that the Clark County and FBI investigations close the case without further consideration.

"Saved us some time," says the sheriff's office. "Got what was coming to him, and we haven't heard a peep outside of the usual gang activity and domestic homicides since then." This doesn't seem to please Jack Crawford entirely, but he is clearly upset by the symbolism and carefulness that the execution of the perpetrator shows. Not a first timer, that Will, and this just makes him scratch at the scab that is his absence all the more.

Resigned to the conclusion being incomplete in some ways, Hannibal does what any other self-important person visiting the high traffic of Las Vegas does after a weekend of debauchery - he leaves a very self-important review.

Bellagio Resort and Casino

Four Stars

H. Lecter said: *While it certainly isn't Lake Como, and I shudder to think of a reality where the waters of an ancient glacial lake are made to have a giant fountain playing show tunes in time to it, the Bellagio resort was better than I expected, with a very fine attention to detail. Clean, polite, overall satisfying staff experience. Food, however, is subpar and derivative without the quality to make up for it.*

The casino staff of the club Blackjack tables were exemplary. I am missing a large sum of money, but the Albarino was fresh, and the company excellent. Please give my regards to Will - he transformed a boring work visit to something quite beyond my expectations.

Consider your education. Ciao, Will.

Not a totally satisfactory bookend, Hannibal sighs when he goes to submit it.

There was so much more to discuss. They could sit on the terrace in the summer heat with melting ice and alcohol for a month, and still Hannibal thinks he would have more questions. He feels robbed in a way he didn't losing hand after hand of cards, even with his considerable skill with odds, and considerable skill lying.

It feels good to be bested, and so too does it hurt.

It is September, and Hannibal finds himself dressed in his sharpest suit. A charity ball benefiting the Freer Gallery calls for his finest mask and most agreeable of countenances. His cheeks hurt with the frozen smile of one tired of hearing of summer trips to the Maldives and "just the joy of experiencing the *culture"* of the Alaskan midnight sun over bubbling drinks and overly bright laughs. The wealthy are a particular kind of self-absorbed torture that he regrets having to play party to.

The MGM National Harbor Hotel on the edge of Alexandria, Virginia's Potomac River is a more straightlaced affair than it's siblings in the Nevada desert, tailored more to the business class and the wants of the political society of the DC area. It would be equally at home in any major city with an airport. Hannibal hates it and its thoughtless streamlined contemporary colors and textures, ready for a conference, but never a proper experience. It would make a clean palette for a kitchen, but compared to the excitement and theatre of the casinos in Vegas, or the old world grandeur in Monaco, it is without flavor.

He drifts to the casino floor when he grows weary of one Madison Swainsworth giving herself more credit for the donation of a collection of Pakistani tapestries than is really merited - Hannibal is seconds away from asking if perhaps she had loomed them herself, and if she'd like to show the audience her best techniques. The cacophony of the slots is preferable to any more comments on Kashmiri weaving and a vacation to the mountains of the Karakoram, which is nowhere even near the tapestry makers, and speaks to her privilege.

There is a question of how long he can be away without appearing rude. He has already put in three hours with his assigned banquet table, complimented the hosts many times over, and given a vague pass to the quality of the resort's catering program. A game or two of Blackjack is hardly going to amount to more than the average smoke break or breakaway for business and a glass of whiskey.

When he scouts for a suitable person to throw the contents of his billfold at to undoubtedly destroy them in good time, he has to re-evaluate when he hears from behind him:

“More federal budget to blow, or is it back to the bond accounts?”

Hannibal feels his stomach turn, and the fullness of himself turn as well on a shoe heel.

Will from New Orleans, Louisiana, perhaps from Wolf Trap, Virginia, stands behind another Blackjack table, this one blue and dark and an order of magnitude less expensive than the ones Hannibal is familiar with Will being behind. His hair is remarkably tidy for once, gelled in place and dark next to the white of his shirt and dark blue vest. Hannibal is gratified to see the color compliments him well after all.

“My own today,” Hannibal replies. “Charity events are a series of personal budgets blown with the intention to further social reach for some, or art programs for others. I am partial to both.”

He licks his lips. “Pray tell, what brings you to this particular alcove of your employers’ properties? I was under the impression they shared you between buildings for your talent, but sending you cross country for a weekend seems a little far-fetched.”

Will gives a smile and a shrug, as he often does. Hannibal loves the rise and fall of it, the truthfulness of it.

“Homesick, I guess,” he says, and his mouth gives that citrusy twist. “A little tired of the co-workers on the Strip too, if we’re being honest. Needed to follow the kind of guy that drops black chips like quarters in a fountain while casting medieval pastime knowledge around like some kind of Oxford-educated wizard. I was told,” he muses, “that I had seen the face of Death.”

(*He doesn’t know, not entirely - but he does know* ***something*** *, like your words had flavor, and he can’t quite place the taste.*)

“Sometimes referred to as Death-Rebirth,” Hannibal says, “though it should be noted Death went to school in Paris and Florence,” he additionally corrects, but grins all the same. But now the gambit - he puts his best mask on, not the finest, but the most necessary. “I am glad to see you applied your lesson practically,” he rasps.

Will is quiet, eyes tracing the sharp cut of Hannibal's collar, of the slash of dark burgundy that his waistcoat makes. Hannibal feels the weight of his consideration as a wave, and he, bubbling beneath, waiting to surface.

The moment passes. Will's smile brightens.

"The Conditions were a little too relatable," says Will. "I was thinking maybe this time we discuss the firmament instead - stars and planets don't seem like they worry much about earthly cares or shitty social stratification."

Hannibal smiles too - broad and warm even in the face of crass language. The real one, not for dinner parties or work or polite conversation. It is full of teeth. He takes a seat, checks the breast pocket of his tuxedo jacket, and pulls a handful of bills out without counting how many or how valuable they are.

"Whatever that gets me," he teases, and Will makes change for chips with the same clever hands that gut Patrick Sears like they've never known anything but cards. Will makes sure Hannibal has a glass of Riesling Auslese, since dinner has already passed, and the charity moves on to self-congratulatory desserts and speeches that he is happy to miss.

"Are you familiar with the Octava Sphera, the outermost heaven that all stars are affixed to?" Hannibal begins, and Will laughs a no, eyes flashing and ear turned to listen.

Instruction must be continuous, if one is to teach.

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